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Undergraduate student perceptions of assessment and feedback practice: fostering agency and dialogue

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Abstract

Assessment and feedback practices sit at the heart of education and the student experience. This paper reports on undergraduate perceptions of assessment and feedback in the Department of Geography at King's College London, UK. Twenty-eight first and second year students across six focus groups provided comments on their understanding of feedback, their feedback experiences, and what they felt could be improved. It was clear that students desired feedback that would help them improve summative performance, but were unsure of how best to use it and consequently had high expectations that led to dissatisfaction. Particular concern was expressed about marking and feedback consistency, and the inherent variation in practice they experienced. Many comments indicated a lack of student agency, which may reflect the power relations that students find themselves in within their community of practice. Finding ways of fostering agency and improving dialogue over perceptions and expectations are suggested to be important steps in improving assessment and feedback practice, and student satisfaction.

Introduction

The provision of feedback on assessment is essential for the educational development and performance of undergraduate students, and a central part of the teacher-student relationship that sits within the 'communities of practice' developed in any given institutional context (Higgins, Hartley and Skelton, 2002; Crimmins et al. 2016). The prime intention of feedback is to facilitate higher cognitive thinking (or 'deep learning') and therefore improvement of one or more aspects of a student's education; for example, of understanding, ability, skills, or performance (e.g. Dawson et al. 2018). Yet ensuring that feedback is both effective and efficient can be challenging, particularly in situations where assessors are faced with limited time to mark and provide feedback, and where students seem to lack agency in engaging with feedback. Research has consistently identified that assessment is central to the student experience, is something that students are particularly focused on, and that there is a substantial appetite for feedback on assessment that sits alongside high levels of frustration and disappointment with it (Price et al. 2011). This results in-part from problems with the content and clarity of feedback, the tone used by assessors, and the timing of feedback, with those students disappointed by the community of practice in which they find themselves often disengaging from the feedback process (Price et al. 2011).

For geographers in particular, assessment and feedback presents several challenges. The discipline is diverse by nature, both in subjects and methods (Bonnett, 2008; Adams et al. 2014) and as such a broad range of different assessment types might be used to address the learning aims and objectives of any given course or module. Indeed, in the UK, the QAA Geography Benchmark Statement (2014), lists eight broad types of assessment (essays/reports, creation of online resources, oral presentations, practical work, examinations, reflective learning journals, research dissertations and projects, and work-based assessments) that may be encountered within a typical geography undergraduate programme; each of which may then be broken down into more specific assessment types (essays for example can include, among other things, press releases, consultancy reports, briefing papers, annotated bibliographies, and article critiques). Geography is also inherently interdisciplinary, covering many aspects of both environment and society, and although such interdisciplinarity is often celebrated and increasingly efforts are made to teach across the environment/society nexus, units of teaching and learning (as well as research) generally remain separated into 'physical' and 'human' domains, based on whether they focus more on environment or society respectively. This can (though does not always) create a separation of preferred assessment types and expectations, which can potentially confuse and disappoint students if not

communicated well. Improvement of assessment practice is therefore especially important for geographers.

There is increasing recognition that the effective provision and utilisation of feedback is a two-way process that requires agency (the capacity to act with a given environment or practice, and which is situated within power relations) on the part of both assessors and students (e.g. Gravett and Kinchin, 2018). Much of this agency will depend on how both parties perceive and understand their assessment and feedback practices. Without alignment of perceptions and expectations, practice will inevitably continue to be ineffective and a source of dissatisfaction for both parties. This paper explores how students perceive the assessment and feedback practice they participate in, and how they understand and utilise agency within this practice. We do this by drawing on the findings of a series of focus groups conducted with second and final-year undergraduate students in the Geography department of a UK Higher Education Institution (King's College London). Our intention is to develop a better understanding of our assessment and feedback practice, both to improve our educational provision and to contribute to similar efforts that must be taking place elsewhere in the geographical education community, and more widely.

Assessment and feedback within UK Higher Education

Within the UK higher education system, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are required to have rigorous protocols in place to ensure a high standard of practice. The Higher Education sector is heavily scrutinised and competitive. Most undergraduate degrees in England (where the majority of HEIs are based) cost £9,250 per year to study (in 2018), which is the maximum that the UK government allows HEIs to charge. The marketisation of Higher Education (see Molesworth, Scullion and Nixon, 2010) has led to increasing expectations for accountability and transparency in terms of educational provision, and the creation of the Office for Students (OfS), an independent regulatory public body reporting to the UK Government Department for Education, in 2017. As a result of this, and as the introduction of student fees has led to HEIs obtaining most of their revenue directly from students (rather than government funding), UK HEIs are increasingly scrutinising the quality of their educational provision, to ensure that they are offering education of the highest possible quality and therefore best able to compete in the sector. Assessment and feedback practices, as central components of quality education, are increasingly a subject of scrutiny and debate as HEIs seek to establish best practice. At the very least, this is a positive development as it has created an agenda for understanding and improvement of assessment and feedback at many HEIs.

Assessment and feedback standards are publicly scrutinised and evaluated in the UK in several ways. In particular, they are part of the undergraduate National Student Survey (NSS), an annual survey completed by final year undergraduate students across the country that looks at student satisfaction with the HEI course they have taken, the results of which are published in national league tables. This in turn forms a part of the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF), which is a periodic government exercise that assesses teaching excellence and student outcomes (e.g. employment) at UK HEIs, and awards quality indicators (gold/silver/bronze ratings) that may ultimately (in the future) link to student fees. Within the NSS, the section on assessment and feedback is consistently amongst the lowest scored across the sector (Williams and Kane, 2008), meaning that fewer students rate themselves as 'satisfied' with their assessment and feedback experience in comparison to, for example, the quality of teaching they have experienced.

This is particularly relevant to Geography; a subject that generally scores relatively high in satisfaction (compared to other disciplines, e.g. RGS-IBG, 2019), but still often performs low (and so even lower than expected, given other areas of satisfaction) for assessment and feedback (Office for Students, 2019). This may be linked to the broad range of assessment types and differing expectations from physical/human geography assessors as noted earlier, and much discussion has taken place regarding ways to improve student satisfaction (e.g. Tuck, 2012; Holmes, 2015), with NSS emerging as a driver of discourse in some cases (Kinchin and Francis, 2017). NSS satisfaction scores are in general lower in London compared to elsewhere, and data from the Office for Students (2019) suggests that in many cases, London-based institutions have particularly low assessment and feedback scores. For the Geography undergraduate programmes across London institutions that are members of the prestigious Russell Group, assessment and feedback scores for 2019 were a mean of 8.7% lower than overall satisfaction for each respective institution (BA and BSc Geography programmes from King's College London, London School of Economics and Political Science, University College London, and Queen Mary University London). This performance is despite the commitment of Russell Group institutions to both 'the very best research and an outstanding teaching and learning experience' (Russell Group, 2019). These points suggest a need to better understand assessment and feedback practice in order to ensure that students are satisfied with their educational experience, particularly within the Russell Group.

Notwithstanding the limitations of such a survey (e.g. Cheng and Marsh 2010; Bell and Brooks 2018) and the problems of associating student satisfaction (rather than e.g. outcomes) with educational

quality, the incorporation of such metrics increases pressure on universities and academic staff to improve their quality of assessment and feedback. Furthermore, the consistently lower satisfaction ratings in this section of the NSS suggest a nationwide mismatch between the perspectives and expectations of assessors giving feedback and students receiving it.

This situation has led to significant frustration on the part of HEIs as they try to address student satisfaction whilst maintaining rigour of practice. As Kinchin et al. (2016, p.4) note: “[there is an] apparent impotence of universities to address students’ on-going dissatisfaction with assessment feedback practices, exacerbated by a lack of agentic engagement on the part of the students, to which institutional responses are typically ‘just do more and do it faster’, as if increasing the dosage of an inappropriate medicine will eventually become a cure.” Such approaches increase pressure on academic staff with seemingly little benefit to students, and so it could be argued that a shift in assessment and feedback practice is needed. Such a shift must have as its basis an evidenced understanding of undergraduate student perceptions and expectations. It is intended that this paper should contribute this collective understanding, and therefore to improvement in practice.

Institutional context: undergraduate assessment and feedback practice in the Department of Geography, King’s College London

The Department of Geography at King’s College London (KCL) is interdisciplinary; in their first year, undergraduate students study both human and physical geography and then choose whether to follow the human-geography focused Bachelor of Arts (BA) or physical-geography focused Bachelor of Science (BSc) degree path. Students can expect to take an average of c.29 pieces of coursework (i.e. non-exam) assessment during their three-year degree programme, and overall coursework in its various forms comprises 78% of assessment across the BA and BSc programmes (Table 1). The vast majority of this assessment fulfils both summative and formative roles; summative because the assessment carries marks that count towards module grades and the final degree classification, and formative because the essays are intended to build knowledge that is useful for future coursework assessments and academic practice more generally, by signalling disciplinary and curriculum-specific expectations of assessment (such as writing and referencing styles, essay structure, forms of critical engagement, and methods and their application).

The Department has no formal differentiation between BA/BSc or human/physical assessments or their marking criteria – instead, individual types of assessment have their own marking criteria

(Exam, Essay, Report, Proposal, Briefing, Visual Presentation, Oral Presentation, Code, Build and Dissertation). Historically, the relation of marking criteria to specific types of assessment may have been unclear – a recent internal review found that 39 different labels were used to describe what might broadly be called ‘coursework’ (e.g. essay, report, policy brief, project report, mini project, course paper, case study report, review essay, etc.). As a result of this review, the 10 assessment types noted above were decided upon, and all labels revised to match these, with their own marking criteria (which were modifications of generic College criteria). A breakdown of these different assessment types across all modules in the BA/BSc programmes for 2018/19 is given in Table 1.

Feedback on these assessments must meet several objectives and is not targeted solely at students but also at academic colleagues who may be involved in second marking activities and, ultimately, quality assurance governors within and without the university itself. As such, the feedback is part of the rigorous moderation procedures prevalent at UK HEIs that have been critiqued by Bloxham (2009) for the constraints they impose on assessment practice, and the extra burden they add to markers. Feedback must: (1) justify the mark or grade given, usually by appropriate reference to marking criteria, to students, internal scrutinisers (e.g. assessment boards, Quality Assurance) and external examiners; (2) provide sufficient guidance to students to allow them to improve their understanding, abilities and/or performance, particularly in relation to thematically and structurally similar assessments undertaken in future; (3) be constructed using appropriate language and tone; and (4) be delivered in a timely fashion. Of these objectives, (2) is the element that is most important to students and the part that arguably requires most alignment of perspectives and agency from both assessors and students.

All coursework in the department is submitted electronically via an online Moodle platform (King's E-learning And Teaching Service, or KEATS). Marks and feedback are returned to students within four weeks (two weeks for selected first-year tutorial modules), also electronically. Assessors provide typed feedback that gives overall comments on the assessment, as well as specific strengths and areas for improvement in (1) substance & content, (2) structure & argument and (3) presentation & quality of expression. These categories are considered to be relatively distinct, to map onto marking criteria and also to illustrate broad areas students might focus on for future improvement.

Students are encouraged to follow-up feedback with staff during drop-in ‘advice and support’ (office) hours, and a statement to this effect, with a link to staff advice and support hours, is part of the feedback template used on every piece of coursework. Students are also advised to download a

copy of each of their marked assessments (with feedback) so that they have a record of it, as once modules 'roll over' to the next academic year on the online platform, essays from previous years are no longer visible to students. Creation of such a portfolio ensures that they can participate in 'metafeedback' during personal tutor meetings, in which their portfolio of assessments can be discussed with their personal tutor and advice offered on areas where they might be able to improve systematically.

Methods

To explore student perceptions of assessment and feedback practice, we conducted six focus groups with undergraduate Geography students at KCL. Focus groups are common in education research, particularly when the focus is on recurrent experiences (such as assessment and feedback), and when an essentially exploratory, non-quantitative approach to perceptions and opinions is required (Vaughn, Schumm and Sinagub, 1996). In the 2017/18 academic year, there were 441 students enrolled in the department's undergraduate programmes. From these we invited 36 students to participate, with 28 ultimately participating. The focus groups were facilitated by a non-member of staff (postgraduate research student) to encourage the students to speak freely on the topic. The students were assured that their comments would in no way have an impact on their own assessment. The focus groups were audio recorded and then transcribed with all participants being anonymised before the transcripts were presented to department staff (each student was represented with a number - signifying focus group - and letter, e.g. student 3B). Data collection and use followed the research ethics guidelines as set by the Economic and Social Research Council and was approved by the King's College London Research Ethics Office, with the ethical approval code MR/17/18-54.

The focus groups sample was designed to be representative of second and third (final) year students, so that all participants would have at least one year's experience of assessment and feedback in the department. Participants were invited across the BA/BSc divide to ensure that the sample was representative. Finally, students were recruited to include a mix of high and low performers based on their exam marks for the previous year. The students were invited via email, and they were compensated with a £25 Amazon voucher for their participation. With a mix of high and low performers in each category, the final sample included: Year 2, BA: 11 students; Year 2, BSc: 5 students; Year 3, BA: 6 students; Year 3, BSc: 6 students. To keep identities anonymous, transcripts

did not distinguish between BA and BSc students, but groups contained a mix of students from both programmes.

The focus groups were structured in three parts. In the first, the students were asked about their *understanding of feedback*, including questions such as ‘How would you define feedback?’, ‘What is the purpose of feedback?’, and ‘How do you receive feedback (in practice)?’ In the second part, they were asked about their *experiences of feedback* in the department. Questions here included ‘Can you give an example of really good/bad feedback and explain why you liked/disliked it?’, ‘Is feedback more important for certain forms of assessment than others and why?’ and ‘Do you look for patterns in your feedback over time?’ In the third and final part, the students were asked to discuss *ideas for improving feedback* in the future, including questions such as ‘How could feedback be different to (a) help you improve your knowledge; (b) help you improve your next piece of work; and (c) prepare you for life after graduation?’ and ‘If you were designing your own feedback, what would you emphasise?’ These questions were approached in a semi-structured fashion to allow the focus group convener and students to respond to the discussion and explore the various topics as they emerged.

Results and discussion: Student perception of assessment and feedback practice

Following transcription of the focus groups (totaling c.50,000 words) and review of the transcript by the authors, several main themes emerged as being particularly relevant to student perceptions of assessment and feedback practice, and student agency in particular. These themes were identified by grouping similar comments from the different groups across the three parts of the focus groups outlined above, and subjectively categorizing them into (1) understanding of assessment practice and the purpose and delivery of feedback, (2) benchmarking assessment expectations concerns around marking and feedback consistency, and (3) student agency. The following results and discussion are based around these three main themes.

Understanding assessment practice and the purpose and delivery of feedback

Student comments indicated that they care greatly about the summative marks they receive for their assessment, as this will determine the classification of degree they will receive; in the calculation of their overall performance, only marks count. This was reflected in some of the comments made: “It’s the mark that matters most, because obviously that’s one of the greatest indications of the level of success.” [2B]; “I obviously just take the mark into consideration” [4A]. “A

273 lot of people in other universities, their first year is just a waste of time, because it doesn't count for
274 anything towards their degree." [3A].

275

276 When asked to reflect on the purpose of feedback, students clearly perceived that feedback is
277 intended to facilitate improvement and development, though this tended to be expressed in vague
278 terms: "Emphasizing areas in which you can improve on...how you can further develop." [1A];
279 "Constructive criticism [that can] maybe enhance your performance academically" [5C]. Most
280 students saw it as a combination of positive and negative comments, e.g. "Pros and cons in the
281 work" [2D]; "A list of stuff that you could do better; a list of stuff that went well." [3A], though this
282 could more accurately be framed as comments on aspects that were done well against those that
283 were done less well or were absent.

284

285 There were differences in perception regarding several aspects of feedback purpose and delivery,
286 however. Students discussed the relative merits of (as they termed it) positive and negative
287 feedback. Several students opined that although positive feedback was worthwhile, and should be
288 recorded so that "if you've done something good in your essay [and] next time you don't include it...
289 then you've lost out." [2C], it was the negative that held most value, as this better facilitated
290 improvement: "I do understand positive feedback, but... negative feedback is more important... it
291 does hurt a little bit, it actually motivates me." [2B]; "I'd rather have negative feedback, because it
292 motivates you to do better." [2D]. In one case negative (critical) feedback seemed transformative:
293 "[my tutor]... ripped mine to shreds, and since then I've completely changed the way I write...
294 although it was horrible, that's probably the best feedback I've ever had." [2C]. Others noted that
295 too much negative feedback might cause some students to "lose all their motivation; I'm wasting
296 away my time." [2A].

297

298 Indeed, several students felt that the most frustrating part of feedback were noncommittal or
299 uncritical comments: "The worst thing is getting an essay back, and getting your mark, and getting
300 any feedback, just a really blasé response, and...not knowing." [2B]; "There's nothing worse than
301 getting... a disappointing mark, and then the feedback just be positive. [I would think] 'well, why
302 didn't I get 100% then?'" [2C]; "The feedback doesn't match the mark for me... you've said lots of
303 good things about it and given me a 2.2 [lower second classification]." [3A]; "I've had feedback that's
304 been really positive and... barely any negatives, and the grade's been like 62... why haven't you given
305 me a first [highest classification], then?" [5E].

306

Concerns about vagueness versus specificity of comments were raised. Students clearly objected to 'vague' feedback that identified broad weaknesses (e.g. in understanding, organization or writing style) as opposed to 'specific' feedback that explains how and why particular elements or examples of the essay are problematic: "Picking examples in your work..." [1B]; "Being specific... helps me understand where I've gone wrong" [2B]; "The best feedback that [I] could probably get is specific to pulling out sentences, pulling out this specific section... this would be seriously helpful." [6D]. There was an agreement amongst students that such specific, detailed feedback is what they want, because this will facilitate higher marks: "I'm looking to know how to get the grade that I want to get... the feedback I'm looking for is how to get to 70 percent plus [i.e. a first class mark]" [6A]. "Although there are marking criteria, I literally have no idea... what the difference is between a 67 and a 73... so understanding specifically how they will place me will help me understand what I need to do to get that higher mark." [6A]. Vagueness of feedback can result from limited marking time on the part of the assessor, and a need to justify a mark rather than give formative guidance. Nevertheless, it was clear that many students found such feedback confusing, and that this seemed to represent a barrier to engagement.

There was also some confused use of terms 'general' and 'specific' in relation to feedback, with most students seeing general feedback as that related to broader, stylistic issues such as "the way you write your essay," [1C], and noting "You're never going to write the same essay twice... general feedback for your essay style... is more helpful." [1B]. In this context, 'general' was interpreted as feedback that would be easily transferable to a broadly similar type of assessment (e.g. another essay, regardless of topic). Specific feedback was sometimes used to refer to content-related feedback (e.g. evidence of misunderstanding of material) as opposed to style, but at other times was used to mean specific and detailed examples of what the marker means (including in relation to style). It was clear that most students desired detailed 'specific' feedback, but in relation to essay style and norms (and therefore transferable) rather than content-focused. "Unless you had another module in that topic, it's more...what [do I] need to change in my writing style to adapt to other essays." [5C]. Overall, most students wanted detailed guidance on the marking criteria (especially key terms in the rubric, such as the meaning of 'critical analysis') and how to write an essay to "push into the next band" [5C], not to be advised what concepts they haven't understood. This reflects a general focus on marks and performance rather than deeper learning; if acquisition of a valued body of knowledge was the principle motivation, students would more highly value this kind of feedback. One student did note this: "It's about whether you're here to just expand your knowledge and interest for the subject you're doing, or if you're just here to get a degree to get to where you want

to [be] after. It's down to the individual." [6C]. However, it is also indicative of a deeper anxiety resulting from a performance culture and assessment practices that place emphasis only on the mark.

Lack of transparency around assessor expectations relating to marking criteria is an important consideration and may be at the heart of some of these comments and concerns. Students may be confused around both the use of general terms (such as 'critical analysis', 'critical reflection', 'originality', 'excellent/sound/good understanding' and so on, which are at the heart of many marking schemes) as well as how the *assessors* are interpreting these terms. An important question for future consideration is whether assessors vary in their understanding, interpretation, and reflection on the marking criteria and key terms. Such variation is likely to be a source of further anxiety for students, and understanding assessor perceptions of assessment practice, alongside that of students, would be particularly pertinent here (Bloxham et al. 2016).

Some students displayed impressive insight in relation to the complexities of feedback. One student was particularly perceptive in identifying that feedback is not just aimed at students but also "the administration. That's like three actors [student, marker, administration] in some sort of nexus where everyone has to understand what everyone else wants." [5B]. Indeed, this arguably pinpoints one of the key challenges for assessors. Noncommittal, vague or overly negative responses, along with a lack of detailed specificity, may be symptomatic of this nexus and the multiple objectives that feedback must meet, as noted above. The combination of summative and formative aims within many pieces of assessment in the department creates a well-recognised conflict between the desire to provide formative feedback targeted at the student, and to justify the mark awarded; with the latter tending to become more dominant, as observed more generally (Price et al. 2011). Part of the dissatisfaction students feel with feedback may be indicative of this tendency for justification of the mark given (why it didn't get a higher mark, where it sits in the marking rubric) rather than guidance for improvement. This is a constraint on assessor agency, and is a structural issue within assessment practice that should be resolved (Price et al. 2011); within the current configuration, markers may be unable to give the feedback they would prefer.

Students generally displayed a short-term view of the utility of feedback. When asked if feedback was useful for building knowledge and skills that would last beyond the university (i.e. going into employment or future study), the consensus was that it wasn't relevant: "I don't think feedback for once you've left university...for me that's not important. What is important is the present and how I

can improve in the next couple of weeks to get my degree.” [2B]; “The... important thing is concentrate on current feedback, for this essay or next essay, not on [the] future.” [2A]; “If you’re going into [a job focused on] that particular topic, then yes [it’s useful]. If not, you can’t really be bothered.” [3A]; “It’s more about the feedback for now, improving for the next piece of coursework.” [4B]. This further reflects anxiety over performance and the need for immediate improvement rather than holistic growth.

Feedback was also seen to become less important as students progressed through the degree: “As you get into third year, the feedback becomes less and less important. If you’d given feedback correctly in first and second year, you probably wouldn’t need it that much.” [3A]. This comment highlights that early experiences with feedback can be particularly important, and are at odds with the temptation to provide greater feedback for the more significant and advanced final year modules: a good case in point being the final year dissertation, which is the largest piece of work that KCL Geography students complete and arguably the one for which they receive the most feedback – but by the time students receive it, they have no more assessments to complete and are close to their final degree classification.

Feedback was also considered by some students to be less important if you did well. “If someone gets a first, they wouldn’t really look at the feedback... they’ve already achieved it, and they wouldn’t want to further improve.” [3C]; “With the university culture that we have, if you’ve got in the 70s, you feel like you’ve accomplished what you need to, so people will probably just skip the feedback, because... they’ve got where they want to be.” [5A]. Once this standard is achieved, feedback loses its purpose.

Comments made by students in the focus groups reflected ‘consumer attitudes’. In a study of UK undergraduate students published in 2002, Higgins, Hartley and Skelton (2002) found that students were not becoming ‘instrumental consumers, driven by the extrinsic motivation of the mark’ (p. 54) but that ‘many of today’s students have a ‘consumerist awareness’ reflected in a focus on achieving a grade alongside intrinsic motivations’ (p. 61). More recently, Bunce et al. (2017) determined that consumer orientations were important mediators of relationships between students and aspects of educational provision, and were associated with lower academic performance, especially in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects, which may be more employment-focused and have greater emphasis on surface learning – and which Geography has a complex relationship with (Domosh, 2014; RGS-IBG, 2017). Changes in the UK HE sector, including dramatic

increases in tuition fees and an increasingly competitive job market, are likely to have reinforced consumer attitudes amongst students. This was reflected in many of the comments made by students in the focus groups, who were particularly concerned about marking practice, and how feedback should facilitate higher marks in subsequent assessments.

Benchmarking assessment expectations and concerns around marking and feedback consistency

With marks being of such importance, a large student concern was marking standards and consistency – partly in terms of feedback given, but largely in the mark awarded. Many students expressed frustration with what they saw as a lack of standardisation and consistency: “Even as a third [final] year sometimes, it’s hard for me to gauge what qualifies as a good, critical essay.” [1A]; “the people who will mark your essay [are] very subjective” [2D]; “The problem with the marking is that it is done by one person, and a lot of the time they’re quite personal comments.” [4A]; “How do you know if someone else would’ve looked in the same way?” [4E]; “[How can marking differ] when it’s such a universal system that should be applied regimentally?” [5C]; “I feel like some lecturers... have a 2.1 in their head as a standard, so everything you’re doing good, you’re doing bad, you’re doing according to a 2.1. Whereas other people have a 1st in their head. So... one of my frustrations [is that] everyone’s got a different standard.” [6A]; “Some lecturers mark differently to others... knowing what the median score was for each [marker] kind of helps.” [4B]; “Some people are stricter than others... we’re feeling that some people might get more marks or less marks depending on the marker.” [3E]. Concerns over consistency and fairness also fed into the level of feedback given, though this was a lesser issue: “Depending on what [marker] you get, you can also get a massively different level of feedback.” [6A].

The reality of mark inconsistency has been explored elsewhere (e.g. Read, Francis and Robson 2005; Bloxham et al. 2016), and is unavoidable to some extent, because “assessment decisions at this level are so complex, intuitive and tacit that variability is inevitable.” (Bloxham et al., p.466). The problematic expectation of marking consistency by students often results from opaque assessment practices. A detailed and extensive regulatory framework of assessment based on marking criteria and multiple quality assurance stages creates the illusion of objectivity and standardisation, when it is widely recognised (though often not communicated to students) that marking is partially subjective and context-dependent (Bloxham et al. 2016).

Managing and moderating variability and inconsistency is largely the purpose of second marking processes and scrutiny by external examiners from other universities; these should ensure that variation is kept within reasonable boundaries, though this can be difficult (Sadler, 2013) and has been argued to be counter-productive (Bloxham, 2009). During an undergraduate career, the subjective awarding of a perceived 'inconsistently low' mark is likely to be balanced by the awarding of an 'inconsistently high' mark over the course of multiple summative assessments by different assessors, but students (of course) do not complain of high marks as being subjective and potentially erroneous. Instead, only when low (and therefore 'unfair') marks are awarded does dissatisfaction arise. Furthermore, this only has to occur a small number of times for students to become disillusioned with their assessment practice and note its inherent inconsistency and subjectivity. This is probably partly responsible for the observed drop in confidence in markers between first year and third year students observed by Francis (2008). Indeed, students were concerned about their inability to challenge (perceived) 'low' marks, or inadequate feedback: "There's no mechanism to contest the mark [4B]; "There's no process, no send-it-back button [to say] please have a look at this and give us some actual good feedback." [6A].

Such concerns about quality assurance and standards signalled a lack of understanding and confidence in the role of moderation processes and external examiners, and also reflected an anxiety about the value of the degree achieved nationally: "Do we even know what's the percentage of the people who get a first? What's the average compared to other universities? Is a 70 here worth a 70 at Cambridge? What does it mean to get out of King's with a 2.1?" [5B].

For some students the solution they saw to this was to increase quality assurance and rigour, for example the creation of not just a marking scheme but a 'marking method': "There's a point where there needs to be like a criteria upon what is actually giving; like a marking method, I guess." [3C] (i.e. how many points are being awarded for what, rather than a broader overall mark classification). For others, more extensive second marking procedures were desired (though a second marking process already exists): "I think I'd like two people marking it and to correct everything." [3A]; "having some sort of consistency between the different tutors would be helpful in the marking... different people can't be exactly the same and mark the same but it feels like [it should] maybe be second marked or... a bit more accurate." [3D]; "It would be helpful if they would get maybe two people marking" [4A]. Only one student recognised that such expectations of precision are unrealistic: "obviously every person can't mark at the same...standard." [3D].

Clearly expectations have to be managed, and that may involve greater honesty and transparency about the marking process and how marking is achieved – for example that assessment is placed in bands based on expert judgement, rather than totting up percentages. One student was perceptive of this: “I assume when you read, you must just think automatically like 2.1, 1st, 2.2. I feel like it’s categorised quite generally.” [6B]. Though the tone and context of the comment suggested that this was a criticism, it is the primary way in which many forms of assessment are graded, and how most expert judgement works (Yorke, 2011). However, it should also be recognised that expert judgement may also involve different interpretations of assessment criteria, and techniques such as mark calibration or benchmarking may be effective ways of helping to mitigate inconsistency (O’Connell et al. 2016); forms of best practice that are utilised in the Department.

Students receive relatively little information on assessment practice, and as a result their expectations of consistency are unrealistic. As the reality becomes clear, they feel that their assessors have been disingenuous. Rather than trying to put in place more extensive and time-consuming mechanisms to improve consistency to address student concerns (which take away from other things, like teaching and educational innovation), it may be more helpful to the students to educate them about the nature of marking and how and why inconsistency exists – and that it does not always affect them negatively. In this, we would be following Bloxham et al.’s (2016, p.466) suggestion that “universities should be more honest with themselves and with students, and actively help students to understand that application of assessment criteria is a complex judgement and there is rarely an incontestable interpretation of their meaning.”

Student agency

A consistent source of frustration for assessors is that despite efforts to improve assessment and feedback practice, students remain dissatisfied or seem unwilling or unable to engage with feedback. This is frustrating given that students may well be doing so, but in ways that are less obvious to both students and assessors (Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick, 2006). Several potential constraints on student agency have already been presented: confusion over the meaning and utility of feedback and guidance provided by assessors, and frustration over a perceived lack of marker consistency and the inability to contest marks. Students are likely to struggle in overcoming these constraints, and in many cases are unable to. As a result, several students indicated that they do not engage with feedback: “I haven’t always read the feedback I have been given.” [4F]; “I’ve never really looked at feedback unless I consistently kept getting low grades...I only really looked at

510 feedback if I thought there were problems and...I could've got a better grade than I did." [5D]; "If
511 you've got in the 70s [a first class mark] you feel like you've accomplished what you need to, so I
512 think people will probably just skip the feedback." [5A]; "I think I hardly looked at feedback. I looked
513 at the grade. If it was a bad grade, I didn't want to read the feedback. If it was a good grade, I didn't
514 care what the feedback said." [6B]. This fed into a wider lack of agency in that students felt they
515 lacked direction in their performance more generally, limiting their independent learning skills (as
516 observed by Gravett and Kinchin, 2018): "They didn't really teach us how to do the figures. We had
517 to actually look online to find out how to do them." [3C]; "If they expect it of us, they should be
518 teaching it to us." [4C].

519
520 Several comments emerged from the focus groups that offered further insights into student agency
521 in relation to assessment and feedback. Students often noted that they desired specific, detailed
522 feedback (as above) and also that they wanted oral feedback: "that would be very helpful, to go to
523 someone who has marked your work to actually speak about the feedback... so you get... a better
524 understanding of it." [1C]; "go through it with me and actually, you know, point out where I've
525 missed the mark." [1B]; "[we] need more coaching." [2D]; "more verbal would be nice" [4A]; "Face
526 to face is so useful compared to... email." [6D]. Students felt that this would help them overcome the
527 constraint of confusion in feedback, and give them greater agency to engage with it; observations
528 supported by Chalmers, Mowat and Chapman (2018), who found that first year undergraduate
529 students found face-to-face marking and feedback more beneficial than written.

530
531 Face-to-face feedback is, to an extent, achievable. The feedback process does not necessarily end
532 once students receive written comments on their assessment. In the Department of Geography at
533 King's all marking text ends with encouragement to visit the marker in their advice and support
534 hours (office hours), or make an appointment, to get further feedback or to clarify anything that's
535 unclear. From the assessor's view, this is providing agency to the students, so that they can make the
536 most of their feedback opportunities. Yet it was clear that many students do not take advantage of
537 advice and support hours to enhance feedback: "it's intimidating on my part to sort of ask... there
538 were a couple of times that I tried to arrange but... we just didn't manage to get a time down. In the
539 end I just gave up trying... it was too much work." [1A]; "sometimes I feel like I'm an inconvenience
540 to them, where it's kind of like 'that is your job'." [1B]; "I don't think that should be a thing that I
541 have to talk to them about." [2C]; "I would only do it for lower marks" [4B]; "There's no point in
542 going because nothing's going to change. The mark's the most important thing." [4B]; "I think that
543 people are [too] stressed out to go back to the people that marked their essay" [5B]; "People don't

544 know how to approach people if they have got a problem.” [5C]. This reflects the power structure in
545 the assessor-student relationship that is underappreciated by many assessors, especially in a system
546 that does not allow marks or expert judgement to be challenged; the assessor, at least in the student
547 view, holds all the power, and this may be one reason why they rely on crude tools such as the NSS
548 to vocalise their frustration. Despite students having the agency to achieve greater understanding by
549 using advice and support hours, the process of doing so seems intimidating or ineffective.

550

551 This was not a universal feeling, and it was clear that some students did exercise agency in seeking
552 out oral feedback, but that this was less common: “It has to come from you, and you have to sort of
553 collaborate... a lot of people don’t talk to their tutor one to one about specific marks.” [2C]; “I think
554 if you want... to get oral feedback, you need to take it into your own hands to be organised. I
555 wouldn’t expect my tutor... to go through my essays, because I know for a fact they don’t have the
556 time to do that.” [2B] “I think it just needs to be organised by you, because to have oral feedback for
557 everyone, it’s going to be really difficult to organise.” [2D].

558

559 The same was true for metafeedback. The opportunity of compiling a portfolio of feedback is rarely
560 taken in practice, and comments suggested that few students seemed willing to take the active step
561 of saving their feedback (despite this only taking seconds); rather viewing their part of practice to
562 end with the act of submitting the assessment, and all other agency resting with staff or the
563 university more broadly. Several students lamented this, criticising the system for not automatically
564 saving the feedback for them: “We lose it after a period of time... I wish I’d [printed it], because I’ve
565 lost it all. Which makes the system a bit rubbish” [2B]; “I know that, on KEATS, I’m not able to see
566 the feedback from last year; it’s like very problematic...so like where the submission inbox is, they’ve
567 replaced it for people resitting. I guess that we all want to keep somewhere the feedback that we’ve
568 received without having to systematically copy and paste somewhere.” [5B]; “[you think] I’ll come
569 back and read that later... and then you realise that it’s no longer there... and you haven’t read any
570 of the feedback.” [4F]. This suggests that some students feel disempowered to the extent that they
571 expect the university to supply everything, and they are passive consumers; they become the
572 opposite of the independent learners that higher education aims to create, as encapsulated in a
573 particularly enlightening response: “If they expect it of us, they should be teaching it to us.” [4C].

574

575 One possible solution is to have pre-completion formative assessments, where feedback is given but
576 marks are not summative. Formative assessment in general has been viewed as important in
577 encouraging students to become self-regulated learners, and Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) note

that formative feedback should not be just a process of transmission from assessor to student, but one where students are encouraged to engage with their own motivation, goal-inspired internal feedback. This is perhaps more possible with pre-completion formative assessment, where students can take greater 'risks' without affecting their grades. Assessors have expressed concerns that lack of student agency might make this change in assessment pattern ineffective. This was supported by some comments: "You've got so many other assessments. You're just not going to do it." [1B]; "If you're not going to gain anything, like a mark towards your degree, I just don't bother." [4A]; though others suggested that it might be useful if combined with a summative exam: "If it was a coursework module, I wouldn't bother; if it was an exam module, I think it does help." [4E]; and one student noting that reticence may be due to unfamiliarity, and that they may be useful: "I haven't had much experience...with formative assignments [meaning non-summative pre-completion assignments]...when I was doing my two formative assignments, I cared a lot more about the feedback, as opposed to the grades." [1A]. Indeed, this may help to relieve the assessment burden felt by both staff and students: "In this department there's a huge emphasis on summative coursework. Almost every single piece of coursework that I've ever written in my student life was important for my degree. And [there's] a lot of pressure related to that." [5B]

This last point is perhaps reflective of an assessment 'arms race' as observed by Harland et al. (2015), whereby students exposed to predominantly summative assessments become demotivated to engage with anything that is not summative or outside of expectations, compromising other educational objectives and leading to dissatisfaction and a paralysis of agency on the part of both students and assessors. Harland et al.'s (2015) call for assessment practices that are more sympathetic with 'slow scholarship', and more infrequent but integrated units of assessment, might well help to provide space for students to exercise agency and therefore become more self-regulated learners (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006), though this would require a more profound shift in assessment practice. Regardless of the specific changes enacted, students should be involved in the decisions behind such changes, as a way of fostering both agency and dialogue, and ultimately empowering students, as models of best practice indicate (National Union of Students, 2015).

Conclusions and considerations: Agentic responses to improve assessment and feedback practice

The focus groups elucidated several aspects of student perception of assessment and feedback practice. It is clear that students knew what feedback was for, and that they desired it, but that it was seen as a tool primarily to achieve greater marks, which is the main motivation for students. A

lack of student agency seemed to stem from three main constraints: (1) confusion over the feedback given, especially where it was vague, noncommittal, or aimed at QA actors rather than the students; (2) perceived inconsistencies in marking and feedback; and (3) a lack of power within their community of practice, for example to seek further feedback or contest the interpretation and meaning of assessment. This lack of agency leads to dissatisfaction, which is reflected in poor survey scores (e.g. NSS).

Although the focus group method provided many detailed responses, variability in the student body remains unexamined. We ensured that students were drawn from across the BA/BSc (human/physical) divide (whether it truly exists or not) but did not label students as either BA/BSc – and nor did any of the students raise this in the discussion. No points of contention or difference between BA/BSc assessment practice were mentioned at all, suggesting that assessment was not (or at least was not recognized as being) unduly partisan, and that if students strongly identified as BA/BSc, this was not considered in relation to assessment.

We also did not separate students into Home/EU or International students; doing so may have raised issues about prior experiences of assessment practice before embarking upon education at a UK university. This may be particularly relevant in the given context, as London-based Russell-Group universities have high proportions of international students. Likewise, variation in sex, gender, ethnicity and economic background were not considered, but may all influence approaches and perceptions of learning and assessment (e.g. Hardwick et al. 2000; Adams et al., 2014).

Such variation will be reflected in the varying motivations of students, as noted by Spronken-Smith et al. (2015). Students who are taking an undergraduate degree with the main motivation of ‘gaining a qualification’, for example, will have different expectations and perceptions than those whose primary motivation is acquiring key skills, or growing as an individual. In these focus groups we explored some aspects of motivation, but deeper insights are likely to be gained with more detailed discussions and a wider sample of students.

Any reconfiguration of assessment practice should attempt to overcome constraints around confusion, perceived inconsistency, power relations and agency, and methods to achieve this may include: (1) reducing confusion by providing open and transparent information on assessment and feedback practice to students, as well as ensuring that feedback is as specific and detailed as possible, especially in the early part of their undergraduate career; (2) developing a dialogue with

students about marking consistency and the reality of expert judgement; (3) being more aware of power structures and how students might experience them, for example by making it easier for students to approach staff for feedback; (4) ensuring that assessors are aware of these issues and undertake best practice exercises, including reflecting on assessment and feedback practice, exploring meaning and interpretation behind marking criteria and their application, and marking calibration; (5) being more aware of student backgrounds, orientations and motivations, to avoid assumptions around a 'one size fits all' approach to assessment and feedback; and (6) reducing frequent points of summative assessment in favour of a 'slow scholarship' approach of fewer, more integrated assessments.

Once improving student agency has been achieved, structural realignment of assessment and feedback practice might include having separate (though linked) formative, pre-completion assessments and summative assessments, with feedback effort concentrated on the former to maximize student-specific guidance and preparation for summative performance. Feedback on the summative assessment could then be much more modest and consist of mark justification for quality assurance. This would increase agency for both staff and students, allowing staff to focus on the feedback they feel most useful, and students to make the most of the feedback they receive.

Overall, the findings presented here suggest that student agency plays an important role in assessment and feedback practice, particularly in the context of the UK's increasingly marketised and commercialised Higher Education landscape. Encouraging a dialogue to enable students to understand their community of practice, and the inherent nature of subjectivities and expert judgement that are embedded within it, represents an important step towards finding ways to enhance that agency. Exploration of the nuances of practice and agency should be considered by all HEIs desiring to improve the standard of their education. These challenges are likely to be more significant for geography than other fields, given the subject's interdisciplinarity and broad range of subjects, methodological approaches, techniques, and assessment types. It is therefore important that geographers explore the complexities surrounding assessment and feedback practice, and should embrace research and innovation in this area to ensure the highest standards for geographical education.

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Assessment type	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3 (Final year)
Exam	5	9	8
Essay	4	18	15
Report	3	4	6
Proposal	0	3	1
Briefing	0	0	3
Visual Presentation	1	2	4
Oral Presentation	2	5	4
Code	0	4	0
Build	0	0	0
Dissertation	0	0	1
Total	15	45	42

Table 1: Number of assessments by type across the BA/BSc Geography undergraduate programmes at King's College London for 2018-19. This is the full suite of assessments utilised, and students would experience a selection of these based on the modules chosen. This includes all pre-completion (non-summative) assessments and in cases where visual and oral presentations are combined, these assessments have been counted twice. A 'code' assessment requires writing computer programming/scripting code, which should perform a specified task or data analysis; while a 'build' assessment is the submission of built instruments or sensors (sometimes running on code in a specified programming/scripting language that may also be part of the assessment), and which may combine both software and hardware development to perform a specified task/objective. In 2018-19 'build' assessments were not used, but are incorporated in the suite of assessments that are available within the Department.